

# National Register Information is a Hidden Treasure

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**I**n 1966, the National Register was established as the official list of properties in the United States worthy of preservation. More than 25 years and 62,000 listings later, the documentation and database associated with the National Register have grown into unique resources in their own right. Reflected in the collection of documentation and the National Register Information System (NRIS) database is the diversity of significant cultural resources found in communities across the country.

Efforts to computerize the National Register were completed in 1986; since then, the NRIS has been updated on a daily basis. New features have been added to the NRIS over the years to increase the speed and utilities for searching the database. The NRIS can be searched by such factors as geographic location, resource type, ownership category, federal agency, architectural styles, architects, historic and current functions, construction materials, areas and periods of significance, and National Register criteria. This information is used for policy analysis, project planning, community awareness, and research. More than 4,000 reference requests per year are answered from the NRIS. Currently, work is underway to move the NRIS to new software and hardware for faster, more accessible, and easier service.

Functioning as an index, the NRIS has opened access to the National Register documentation that was not possible a decade ago. Standard requests, such as lists of properties for a county or state, are answered more quickly than before; other queries, such as a list of Frank Lloyd Wright houses or hydroelectric power stations, that were previously not possible can now be easily made. The NRIS, along with the National Register nominations, photos, and maps documenting these properties, serves as a powerful research tool for studying the built environment and cultural history of the United States.

National Register data is available in a variety of formats. Casual users, who need a list of properties in their community or the answer to a specific question, can request printouts. Sometimes these requests are a first step in a research project that includes a visit to NPS offices to use National Register documentation. Special topic publications on historic districts, churches, and railroad stations have been researched in this fashion.

On-line access to the NRIS is available for states and federal agencies. Work is underway to expand on-line access capabilities to the general public. Internet access is also under consideration. Those who need to manipulate NRIS data, in combination with their own data or computer systems, can receive a download of subsets of the database. Frequently this is the method that federal agencies and many states prefer. The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, included NRIS data on

property locations in EnviroText, an on-line database of environmental regulations available to other agencies.

With an automated database, such as the NRIS, cultural resource data can be combined with factors such as environmental information. Viewing cultural resources in a wider context provides a more complete understanding of the resources and management issues. Geographic information systems can be used to combine data about archeological sites with spatial information about elevations, soils, and distance to water to assist in developing predictive models for site locations. These can be used to develop strategies for research, surveys, field work, and site protection.

Historic resource data from the NRIS or similar databases can also be combined with census data, such as in a recent NPS study conducted for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The report estimated the number of historic residential buildings that might qualify over the next five years for proposed federal tax incentives. To arrive at these estimates, a dynamic model was prepared including NRIS data about historic residences, National Register documentation, census data on community populations, current and past statistical data on numbers of National Register listings, State Historic Preservation Fund grants, and applications for federal Preservation Tax Incentives. The resulting data informed discussions about the tax incentive proposal.

In addition to the analytical tools that automated systems provide, the ability to share information is also enhanced. For example, data from the NRIS can be transferred to the Integrated Preservation Software (IPS) developed by NPS. IPS can be customized by users to gather additional data, such as descriptive text required for a specific project. Data pre-loaded in IPS from the NRIS or a state's inventory system can also be used to facilitate surveys by listing the resources already identified in a given area. Surveyors would merely need to update existing data, rather than create new forms. Updated and new data could then be shared with the state or NPS and transferred electronically.

Sharing data in this fashion reduces the amount of time required by already overburdened staff to enter data or fill out forms. The ability to transfer information facilitates widespread access for cultural resource management activities as well as research and publication projects. The less time that is spent in redundant capture of information, the more time that is available for analyzing and using the data.

For more information on receiving printouts, call the National Register Reference Desk at 202-343-5726. Copies of National Register documentation can also be requested, but researchers are welcome to visit NPS offices at 800 North Capitol Street, NW, Room 99, to use the National Register documentation collection. Inquiries regarding on-line access or data transfers can be directed to John Byrne, NRIS Database Manager, at 202-343-3941. Information about the Integrated Preservation Software can be requested by contacting Eleanor O'Donnell or Diane Miller at 202-343-3941.

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